

Court says minimum wage increase applies to airport workers

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The Washington Supreme Court has ruled that a voter-approved initiative to raise the minimum wage in the city of SeaTac should apply to workers at the airport.

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The Associated Press

OLYMPIA, Wash. (AP) — A divided Washington Supreme Court ruled Thursday that a first-in-the nation initiative to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour in the city of SeaTac should apply to workers at the airport.

In its 5-4 ruling, the majority upheld the entirety of Proposition 1 and expanded it to airport workers, writing that there was no indication that the law would interfere with airport operations. SeaTac's minimum wage was raised to \$15 an hour in 2014, and increased again to \$15.24 this January because it is tied to the consumer price index.

SeaTac was the first city in the nation to adopt a \$15 minimum wage, but was followed soon after by Seattle, which opted for a tiered approach. Los Angeles and San Francisco have also enacted \$15 minimum wages, and other cities are considering following suit.

Residents of SeaTac, the small city of about 28,000 people that surrounds Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, voted in November 2013 to raise its minimum wage and give workers other protections, like paid sick leave. A month later, a King County Superior Court judge ruled that the law does not apply to the airport because it is controlled by the Port of Seattle, not the city of SeaTac. In that ruling, Judge Andrea Darvas said that while the new law did apply to hotel and parking lot workers in SeaTac, it didn't extend to employees and contractors at the airport.

Proponents of the new law say that currently, 1,300 people in the transportation and hospitality sectors off airport grounds receive the higher pay, and that another 4,700 on airport grounds will benefit from Thursday's ruling.

The high court heard the case in June 2014. Businesses, including Alaska Airlines, and the Port of Seattle argued that the airport is run according to state and federal law, not local ordinances. Labor groups that sponsored the initiative have said one of their aims was to improve working conditions at the airport.

The majority opinion, written by Justice Susan Owens, said that the state statutes surrounding jurisdiction over the airport were ambiguous.

Justice Debra Stephens authored the dissent, which focused most on the jurisdiction aspect, stating that the majority's decision "offends the statute's plain language" that Port of Seattle has exclusive jurisdiction of the airport.

Stephens notes a part of the statute that makes an exception for a municipality to enforce a fire code at the airport.

"If the city of SeaTac can unilaterally impose other measures at the airport, such as Proposition 1's sweeping wage and employee right protections, what is the point of requiring the Port of Seattle's consent to enforce a minimally intrusive fire code?" Stephens wrote.

Seattle's law, adopted last year after a strong push from labor and grass-roots activists, bumped the city's minimum wage to \$11 an hour beginning April 1, above Washington state's highest-in-the-nation statewide minimum of \$9.47. Scheduled increases that depend on business size and benefits will bring the minimum to \$15 within four years for large businesses and seven years for smaller ones.